

GHANA HEALTH SERVICE ETHICS REVIEW COMMITTEE GUIDELINES ON ONLINE SURVEY FOR RESEARCH WITH HUMAN PARTICIPANTS

Tel: +233-503539896/ 233-0302679323/ Fax + 233-0302685424

Email : ethics.research@ghsmail.org



Introduction

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic which has necessitated moving most data collection to online survey, the GHS-ERC has developed the following guidelines on what to include in the participant's information sheet and consent to guide Principal Investigators/Researchers in putting together their protocol for submission.

In addition to this Guidelines, please ensure that the requirements for submitting protocols available on the GHS website are fully adhered to. Please also include a justification for choosing the specific type of online survey. The types of online survey may include but not limited to social media networks such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, WhatsApp, etc.

Participant Information Sheet & Consent Form

Before the start of any online survey, participants should be provided with Participant Information Sheet (PIS) that they can have as evidence. The PIS should be a downloadable document which begins with an initial page that provides brief information about the research for participants to make an informed decision of whether to participate in the study or not. It should also outline the purpose and nature of the research, content of the research, risks, benefits, compensation (if there is none, this should be clearly stated), contact details of the Principal Investigator and contact details of the ERC Administrator for participants to contact for ethical issues and rights to participation.

This will ensure that participants are given the legally required data protection information in a form that they can retain but which does not make text within the survey itself overly long or complex.

The survey should have a final page containing a “Submit” button, prefaced by a statement informing participants that clicking the final “Submit” button of the survey at the end will constitute the participant providing consent to participate, in full knowledge of the information in the participant information sheet.

Partial / Uncompleted Survey

Principal Investigators (PIs)/Researchers should consider what will happen with participants’ data should they only partially complete the survey and fail to complete the final “Submit” phase that indicates consent. If incomplete data is of value and would not compromise the integrity of the dataset, it may be useful to do the following:

- Ensure it is not a requirement for submission that all questions be answered
- Include a statement to let participants know that they can exit the survey at any time by skipping to the final page.

Below is a detailed explanation of some components of the PIS indicated above:

- **Nature of Research Questions**

Participants should be informed on what type of questions each section of the survey contains. If the survey contains sensitive issues, PI should provide an appropriate helpline number for participants to contact.

- **Confidentiality**

Participants may be unfamiliar with the computer-based methods being used for the study, so PI should explain clearly or provide detailed procedures that will be used to track their responses and preserve their confidentiality.

- **Psychological risk**

In order to reduce the possibility of psychological harm to participants, PIs should allow participants to skip questions or withdraw from the study at any time.

- **Skipping a question**

There is a possibility that participants may accidentally skip a question. In order to avoid this, some online surveys require participants to answer every question before the form can be submitted or go to the next page. You might want to require participants to answer each question, but also include a response option for each question that allows the participant to skip the question.

- **Withdrawal**

On each page of the online questionnaire, PI should include an option that will allow the participants to withdraw from the survey at any time without being penalized. If the participant chooses this option, all responses from that subject should be discarded.

- **Anonymity**

Some participants may be concerned that their responses to an online survey could be traced back to them via their e-mail address, their IP address, or other information that PI could attempt to capture. PI should reassure participants that he/she will not attempt to capture information that they do not voluntarily provide.

If sensitive information is being asked and PI requests participants' e-mail addresses for any reason, PI should specify that he/she will save the e-mail addresses in a separate file from the other responses, such that a participant's specific responses cannot be linked back to their e-mail address.

Note: Please be clear about the distinction between anonymity and confidentiality and the implications for participants.